**What Explains the Virginia Republican Surge in 2021?**

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Abstract

In the midst of the "calcification" (Sides et al. 2022) of American politics where electoral swings from one election to the next have been muted, the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election stands out. Compared to the previous election, there was a significant change in the outcome and a substantial increase in voter turnout. This paper analyzes those changes and finds that the Republican party tide was not mediated by local conditions with respect COVID-19, economic performance, or educational issues. We do find that turnout increased disproportionately in Republican counties compared to Democratic ones, which suggests an important role for voter mobilization in explaining the outcome.

Paper prepared for presentation at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA. We appreciate feedback on our findings and previous drafts from Sharif Amlani, Chris Hare, Walt Stone, and the UC Davis American Politics Reading Group. We also thank the Rapoport Family Foundation for supporting this research through a 2022 UC Davis Graduate Student–Faculty Summer Research Collaborative.

In the midst of the "calcification" (Sides et al. 2022) of American politics where electoral swings from one election to the next have been muted, the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election stands out. This election's 11 point swing to the Republicans is especially striking when compared to the previous gubernatorial election in 2017, which saw a nine percentage point margin of victory for the Democrats. Indeed, Glenn Youngkin was the first Republican to be elected to statewide office in Virginia in over ten years.

Taking place less than a year into the Biden presidency amid rapidly changing economic conditions and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many in the media looked to the election as a harbinger of what could happen in the 2022 midterm elections (Paviour 2021; Scheffer 2021[1]; Elving 2021). Along with New Jersey, Virginia is unique in holding its gubernatorial election the year following the presidential election. Consequently, the outcomes of both of these elections tend to serve as a 'reality check' on the party holding the White House as they provide evidence of political mood swings that often pervade on the national level.[2] With the exception of Terry McAuliffe in 2013 – a Democrat who first won the governorship the year following Obama's successful re-election bid, no candidate from the sitting president's party has successfully captured Virginia's governorship in over 30 years (Paviour 2021)[3] – a pattern that largely aligns with the phenomenon of midterm loss. As it turns out, the Virginia outcome did not signal a coming national Republican tide, and instead stands out as an apparent exception to this trend. Nevertheless, and perhaps as a consequence, understanding the explanation for the Republican

[1] Election 2022: What Democrat And Republican Strategists Predict Will Happen In Midterms.

[2] An October 2021 NPR story compares the role of these states entering the midterm election cycle to that of Iowa and New Hampshire at the start of the presidential election year, observing that, 'if [Iowa and New Hampshire] are…cast as kingmakers, Virginia and New Jersey come along at the other end of the cycle as correctives. They are typically [the] first round of real-world voting that brings a newly elected or reelected president back to earth" (Elving 2021, Here's why the other 48 states care who's governor of Virginia and New Jersey).

[3] Can the Virginia governor's race tell us anything about the 2022 midterms?

swing in Virginia is important, especially as it relates to the nature of electoral accountability (Fiorina 1981; Huber, Hill and Lenz 2012; Achen and Bartels 2016).

In this paper, we attempt to gain insight into the nature of electoral accountability by focusing on Virginia's 133 counties and county-equivalent municipalities.[4] As we illustrate below, amidst the state-level swing to the Republicans and a significant turnout increase of more than ten points, there was notable variation in county-level electoral change. That variation is the analytic focus of this paper, and we use it for leverage to test a variety of hypotheses drawn from the large and growing research literature on electoral accountability.

Our findings suggest that the Republican tide was a statewide phenomenon that does not appear to have been mediated by local, county-level differences in COVID-19 severity or economic performance. We also do not find that the education issue was especially influential in some counties compared to others. On the other hand, we do find evidence that the turnout increases in 2021 compared 2017 were notably larger in Republican leaning counties compared to Democratic ones. Thus, a critical part of the explanation for the Republican party's success in Virginia in 2021 may have been the result of successfully mobilizing its voters.

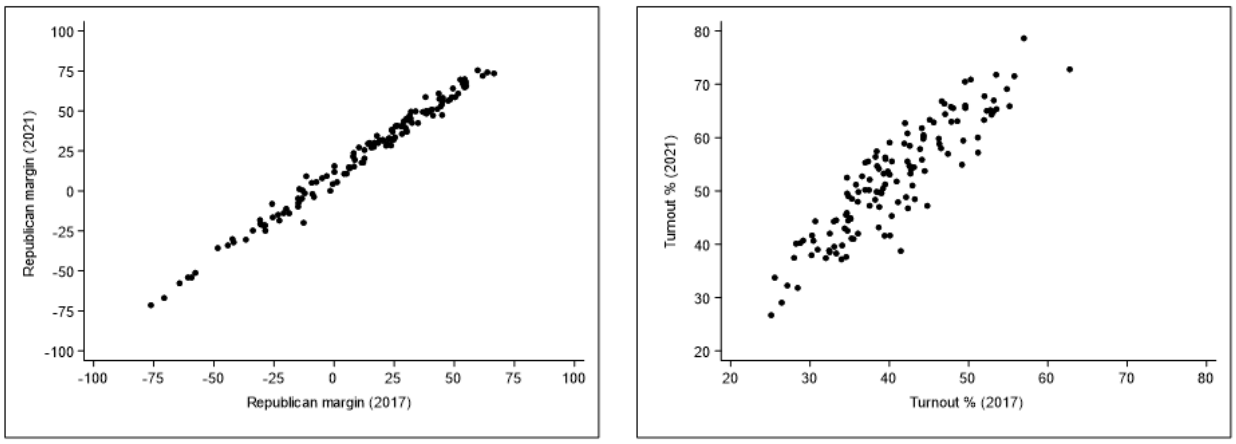
## Electoral Context

Like that for most elections, there is evidence of continuity and change in the outcome of Virginia's 2021 gubernatorial election. Continuity is evident by comparing the county-level outcomes and turnout rates in 2021 to those from the previous gubernatorial election in 2017. The left panel of Figure 1 shows a very strong relationship between outcomes in the two

[4] In addition to its 95 counties, Virginia has 38 county-equivalent municipalities. An example of such is Fairfax City, which is an independent city not incorporated into the surrounding Fairfax County. For simplicity we will just use "county" rather than "county and county-equivalent municipality."

elections. Counties where Republicans performed strongly in 2017 remained that way in 2021 as was the case for counties where Democrats performed well. Substantial continuity in turnout is also evident across the elections (right panel of Figure 1). While not as strong as that for electoral outcomes, this correlation between turnout levels in 2017 and 2021 is nevertheless notable (r=.90).

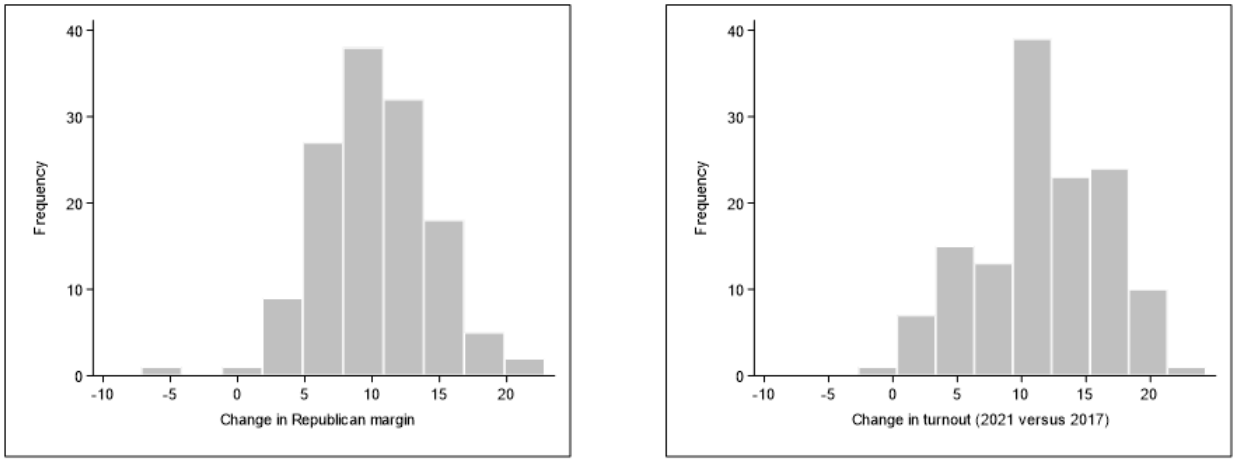
**Figure 1. Electoral Continuity in the 2021 Virginia Gubernatorial Election**




Amidst this continuity among these factors, the magnitudes of the Republican swings and turnout increases were larger in some counties compared to others. This is evident in Figure 2, which shows the magnitudes of the changes in these factors from 2017 to 2021. The left panel of Figure 2 shows that across all counties, there was an average swing in the Republican margin of about 10 points with a standard deviation of 4.1 points. Meanwhile, the right panel demonstrates that turnout increased an average of about 11 points with a standard deviation of nearly five (4.9) points.[5] Our hypotheses and analysis attempt to account for this variability, which is illustrated in Figure 2.

[5] As explained below, there is very little relationship between the magnitude of the swing to the Republican party and the change in turnout. The correlation is just 0.11.

**Figure 2. Electoral Change in the 2021 Gubernatorial Election**




## Hypotheses

There is a longstanding and large literature of research on the causes of short-term electoral swings like those evident in the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election (Kramer 1971; Fiorina 1981; Achen and Bartels 2016). Of particular relevance are "referendum" and "retrospective" voting models where voters (sometimes) hold the incumbent party accountable for prevailing conditions that coincide with the election.[6] The Virginia election occurred with a Democratic president in office and the Democrats as the incumbent gubernatorial party.[7] As a result, to the extent that there would be electoral reward or punishment meted out by the electorate, one would expect it to be more straightforward than under conditions where the party of the president differed from that of the incumbent governor.

[6] These accountability models need not be rational in the sense that they do not take into account whether the incumbent party is responsible for the conditions that influence electoral behavior.

[7] Virginia law prohibits people from serving consecutive gubernatorial terms. The incumbent Democratic governor – Ralph Northam – therefore did not run for reelection. Instead, the previous Democratic governor – Terry McAuliffe – was the candidate.

Achen and Bartels (2016) provides an extensive review of retrospective voting literature, and its framework guides our approach and analysis. One factor that has repeatedly been demonstrated to be associated with electoral change in economic performance, especially recent economic conditions (Kramer 1971, Hibbs 2000). The basic hypothesis is that better economic conditions favor the incumbent party while worse conditions benefit the other party.

At the time of the election, Virginia's economy was recovering slowly but steadily from the economic devastation brought on by the coronavirus pandemic the previous year. Throughout 2021, the number of Virginians filing claims for continued unemployment insurance was trending steadily downward. By July of that year, the state had gained back nearly 144,000 jobs, an increase of 3.8 percent relative to the height of pandemic-induced job loss in April 2020 – though the number of jobs had not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels (Kestner et al. 2021).[8] In light of the variability in electoral swings across counties, we sought a county-level measure of economic performance. The best available measure we found was the unemployment rate. In general, we would expect the non-incumbent party (the Republicans) to benefit from higher unemployment. This might be evident in a variety of ways:

> **H1:** Higher unemployment rates will be associated with larger electoral swings to the Republican party.
>
> **H2:** Larger increases in unemployment rates will be associated with larger electoral swings to the Republican party.

Though we test both hypotheses, we acknowledge that H2 is more consistent with existing research because that research focuses on changes in economic performance on the premise that voters care more about whether conditions are improving or worsening as opposed to the overall levels of economic performance. Put another way, existing research predicts that a county with a

[8] Statewide Economic Analysis Report

high unemployment rate that has cooled from an even higher unemployment rate would swing less to the Republicans than a county with a low unemployment rate that has increased from an even lower rate.

We adapt this approach to analyzing the main non-economic conditions prevailing at the time of the election, namely COVID-19 severity. While Achen and Bartels (2016) explain why the flu pandemic of 1919 did not appear to have electoral repercussions, the same may not be true for COVID-19.[9] In the highly partisan-polarized contemporary world, many issues that have no logical or necessary connection to partisan politics nevertheless become entwined with it. Scholars have found that polarization exacerbated the politicization of COVID-19 response efforts (Druckman et al. 2020). While the pandemic began during a Republican presidency, by the time of 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election, one might expect myopic voters to hold the Democrats accountable for continued COVID-19 effects:

> **H3:** Greater COVID-19 severity will be associated with larger electoral swings to the Republican party.
>
> **H4:** Greater change in COVID-19 severity will be associated with larger electoral swings to the Republican party.

Similar to our hypotheses about economic performance, we consider the possibility that levels of COVID-19 severity along with changes in levels of severity may be related to electoral swings.

In addition to any retrospective voting that may have been taking place in the election, there is also the possibility some issues may have been especially salient and the cause of electoral change. Youngkin made education the central issue of his campaign, framing the matter around the narrative of 'parent choice' – meaning that parents have a 'fundamental right' to be

[9] For analyses of the effects of COVID-19 severity on the 2020 presidential elections, see Sides et al (2022) and Algara et al (2022).

involved in making decisions about their child's education.[10] The scope of Youngkin's 'parent choice' platform was extensive, ranging from decrying remote learning and school mask and vaccine mandates to pledging to ban critical race theory from Virginia's public schools on his first day in office.[11] In a symbolic sense (Edelman 1964; Sears et al 1980), and in light of the existing party cleavages on educational issues, it might be the case that to the extent that educational issues contributed to the Republican tide or motivated people to vote, they may have had uniform effects across the electorate. If this is the case, we would not observe variation in the effects across counties. On the other hand, if there were effects, and those effects were larger among people with more direct stakes in the issues (i.e., had greater self interest) (Downs 1957; Young et al. 1987), could expect to see disproportionate turnout increases and Republican swings in counties where such people live. Although we do not have direct measures, as we explain below we attempt to tap this aspect of "interest" in a variety of ways. Here, we note the following:

> **H5:** Turnout will increase disproportionately in counties where there are larger numbers of people with direct stakes in education issues.
>
> **H6:** In counties where there are larger numbers of people with direct stakes in education issues, there will be larger electoral swings to the Republican party.

Data and Variables

As described above, we focus on county-level change in the Republican vote margin and turnout from the 2017 to the 2021 gubernatorial elections.[12] To assess county-specific COVID-19 effects we consider two measures of pandemic severity made available through the

[10] Youngkin tries to harness Virginia parent anger in possible '22 GOP preview - POLITICO

[11] Who Is Glenn Youngkin, and How Did He Win the Virginia Governor's Race? - The New York Times

[12] These data are available from Virginia Department of Elections Historical Database. 2021. https://historical.elections.virginia.gov.

Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the *New York Times*.[13] One measure is the 7-day rolling COVID-19 case average per-capita for the month preceding the election (i.e., October 2021). The second measure is the election-year change in the COVID-19 case rate, that is the change from January 2021 to October 2021.[14]

Our measures of county-level economic performance are based on unemployment levels, provided by FRED database maintained by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. As specified in our hypotheses above, and similar to our COVID-19 severity measures, we consider the level of unemployment in the month closest to the election (October) along with the election-year change by comparing the October rate to the January one.

In order to examine the effects that educational issues may have had on the election, we use a variety of data. Fortunately, public school districts in Virginia generally operate on a county level, so school district level data may be used in a county-level analyses like ours. The small number of exceptions are small towns and cities that are incorporated into a larger county. For these we combined the figures with their respective counties.[15] We obtained public school enrollment numbers for the 2020-21 academic year from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE).[16] We also obtained estimates of the total school age population (defined as ages 5-18) per county for the 2020-21 year from the UVA Weldon Cooper Center. To determine the percentage of school age children enrolled in public schools per county during the 2020-21

[13] All the data are available from the CDC website: https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home.

[14] Data on 7-day rolling COVID case averages for the week preceding Election Day was not available for Highland County; therefore, that county is excluded from our analysis when using this measure.

[15] These exceptions are Fairfax City Schools (combined with Fairfax County), West Point Town Schools (combined with King William County), and Colonial Beach Schools (combined with Westmoreland County).

[16] In addition to the school districts listed above that were combined with their respective counties (Fairfax City, West Point Town, and Colonial Beach), USDOE did not have enrollment or demographic data for James City County Schools and Emporia City Schools. Therefore, these counties are excluded from this analysis.

school year, we divide the USDOE enrollment numbers by the respective school age population estimates.[17] In addition, we use USDOE data on student race (the percentage of enrolled students reporting as non-Hispanic whites) and parental educational attainment (the percentage of parents holding at least a Bachelor's degree).[18] From the Virginia Department of Education we obtained data on the percentages of students with different learning "modalities" during the 2020-21 school year, specifically in person versus hybrid versus remote.[19] We then computed the percentages of students in each district who were exclusively remote during the year. Across counties these values ranged from less than one percent to 100 percent.

Results

Table 1 shows two estimates of two models that relate county-level Republican vote swing in 2021 to our measures of COVID-19 severity.[20] The first model is based on the COVID-19 severity level in the month before election day. The estimated effect (.29) is barely larger than the standard error (.28), and we therefore cannot be confident that there is any real relationship at all (p=.30). Moreover, when we take into account the range of observed values for the observed October rates there is only a modest substantive relationship. Comparing the 5th percentile value (14) and the 95th percentile value (64), the estimated difference in the Republican vote swing is

[17] One county's school age population estimate (Radford City) was an outlier value (greater than 3 standard deviations above the mean) and was therefore excluded from the analysis.

[18] Three counties (Bath County, Highland County, and Lexington City) did not have parental educational attainment variables available due to insufficient sample size.

[19] Two counties, Portsmouth City and Richmond City, exclusively offered remote learning during the 2020-21 year. All other counties offered a combination of in person, hybrid, and remote modalities.

[20] In terms of estimating the effect of X (in this case COVID severity) on change in Y (in this case the 2021 Republican vote swing), regressing 2021 Republican vote swing on X and the 2017 Republican vote margin is equivalent to regressing the 2021 Republican vote margin on X and the 2017 Republican vote margin.

just 1.5 points between counties at the low and high ends of the observed COVID-19 rates in October.

**Table 1. COVID-19 Severity and 2021 Republican Vote Swing**

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| COVID-19 Severity | | |
| October 2021 rate | .029 | |
| | (.028) | |
| Jan-Oct 2021 change | | .026 |
| | | (.016) |
| 2017 Republican margin | .032** | .032** |
| | (.012) | (.011) |
| Constant | 8.97** | 10.78** |
| | (0.94) | (.66) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .08 | .10 |
| N | 133 | 133 |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. * p<.10; ** p<.05.

The second model focuses on changes in COVID-19 rates from January through October of the election year. This estimated relationship also cannot confidently be distinguished from zero (p=.11), and substantively the estimated difference between counties with the smaller (5th percentile observed values) and larger changes (95th percentile) in their COVID-19 rates is modest, only 2.0 points. Thus whether we focus on COVID-19 levels, or changes in levels, we find little support for our hypotheses.

Turning to economic conditions, Table 2 shows a series of regression model estimates of county-level Republican vote swing in 2021 with our economic performance measures as independent variables. Similar to the COVID-19 severity models, the first set of estimates in the

table uses October 2021 county-level unemployment rates to predict the Republican swing in 2021. The estimates indicate that counties with higher unemployment rates swung less to the Republican Party than counties with lower rates. This result is inconsistent with our hypothesis that the Republican Party would be advantaged in counties where economic conditions were worse in the months preceding the election. At the same time, the null hypothesis of no relationship probably should not be ruled out (p=.17). Further, upon closer inspection, we found that four small population counties were outliers with high unemployment rates.[21] When we reestimate Model 1 with these four counties excluded, the estimated effect is .19 (p=.65) lending further credence to the null hypothesis.

**Table 2. Economic Conditions and 2021 Republican Vote Swing**

| Variables | Model 1 | Model 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Economic Conditions | | |
| October 2021 unemployment rate | -.46 | |
| | (.34) | |
| Jan-Oct 2021 change in unemployment | | -.39 |
| | | (.56) |
| 2017 Republican margin | .033** | .040** |
| | (.011) | (.011) |
| Constant | 11.46** | 9.09** |
| | (1.21) | (1.20) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .09 | .08 |
| N | 133 | 133 |

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. * p<.10; ** p<.05.

[21] While the mean county unemployment rate was 3.3 percent (sd=1.1), these four counties (Emporia, Martinsville, Petersburg, and Portsmouth) with the highest rates were all at six percent or more.

Model 2 in Table 2 shows how economic conditions had changed in advance of the election by focusing on the change in unemployment rates from January to October of the election year. As in the case of unemployment levels, we find that larger increases in unemployment are associated with smaller Republican swings, which is contrary to our hypothesis. At the same time, the magnitude of the estimated effect is quite modest and cannot confidently be distinguished from zero (p=.49).[22] Overall, then, there is no evidence in favor of our (directional) hypotheses and very little evidence that there was any real relationship between unemployment levels or changes and the Republican partisan tide in 2021.

The final set of hypotheses relate to how the issue of education may have been related to electoral change in Virginia in 2021. With respect to the Republican partisan tide, we sought ways to identify counties where there were larger numbers of people with direct stakes in the education issue or where the education issue may have had particular resonance among at least some groups. Most of our preliminary analyses turned up little of note. The most promising avenue was in relation to the educational attainment of parents with children in the public schools. As shown in the first column of Table 3, in counties where public school parents were more educated (a larger percentage of them had college degrees), the Republican partisan tide was smaller.[23] Put another way, the Republican tide was larger in counties where public school parents were less educated.

Viewed in isolation, the relationship between parental education and the Republican vote swing in 2021 might imply that the election – with its emphasis on issues like the teaching of

[22] Unlike with unemployment levels, we did not find any extreme values that might be influencing the estimated relationship.

[23] To avoid conflating the relationship between parental education and the Republican tide with the relationship between education more generally and the Republican tide, the model in Table 3 includes a variable measuring the percentage of people in each county with a college degree ("overall education") in addition to the one tapping parental education.

critical race theory – activated or made salient an issue that contributed to the Republican partisan tide. This was certainly the logic behind our hypothesis. However, further analysis suggests that this is not the case. As a placebo test, we replicated the model for the 2017 Republican vote swing. If the relationship in 2021 was caused by the specific issue emphases and content of that campaign, then it should not be evident in data from the previous election. However, as the second column in Table 3 shows, this is not the case. In fact the relationship between public school parent education and the Republican vote swing was stronger in 2017 than in 2021. So, if anything, the 2021 campaign appears to have dampened the effect rather than producing it.

**Table 3. Education and Republican Vote Swing**

| Variables | 2021 | 2017 |
|---|---|---|
| Public school parent education | -.10** | -.44** |
| | (.03) | (.04) |
| Overall education | -.05 | -.22 |
| | (.18) | (.32) |
| Previous Republican margin | .02* | .15** |
| | (.01) | (.02) |
| Constant | 13.31** | 14.80** |
| | (1.64) | (2.91) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .15 | .56 |
| N | 123/124 | 123/124 |

Notes: For "2021" the dependent variable is the change in the Republican vote margin from 2017 to 2021 and "previous Republican margin" is the 2017 Republican margin. For "2017" the dependent variable is the change in the Republican vote margin from 2013 to 2017 and "previous Republican margin" is the 2013 Republican margin. Standard errors in parentheses. * p<.10; ** p<.05

Shifting our analysis from the Republican partisan tide to changes in turnout from 2017 to 2021, we looked for patterns in the data that might be consistent with our Hypothesis 5, that the education issue may have motivated disparate turnout increases across counties. Our analyses revealed little support for the proposition. However, one robust relationship that we did find was between the strength of the Republican party and the magnitude of the turnout increase in 2021. Figure 3 shows the relationship. In counties where the Republican margin was larger in 2017 turnout increased substantially more than in counties where the Republican margin was smaller.

**Figure 3. Republican Party Strength and 2021 Turnout Swing**

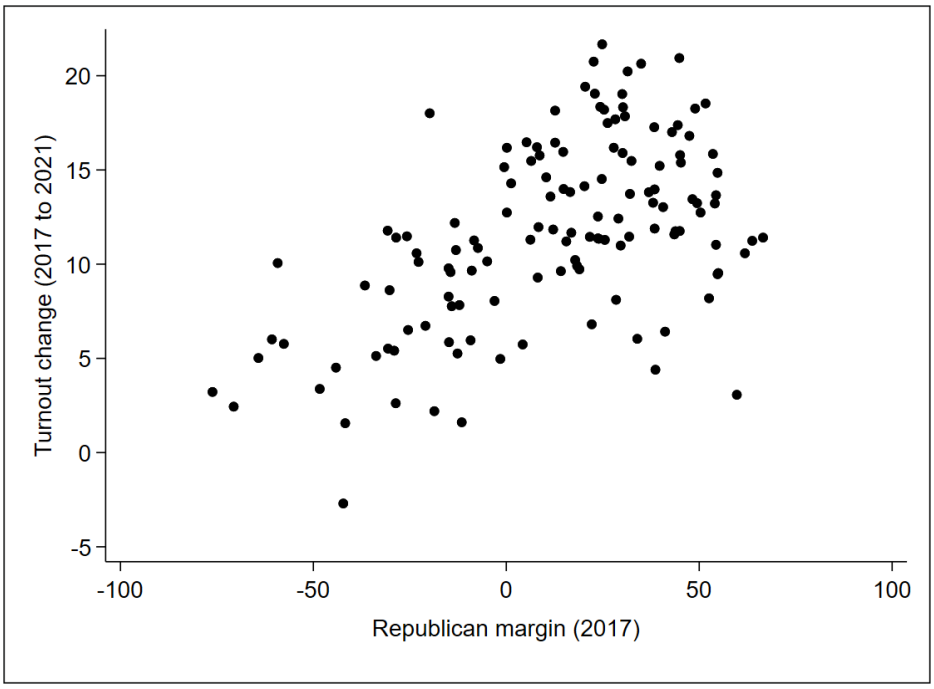


**Table 4. Republican Party Strength and Turnout Change in 2021**

| Variable | Estimate |
|---|---|
| Republican margin (2017) | .092** |
| | (.010) |
| Turnout (2017) | .292** |
| | (.041) |
| Constant | -1.27 |
| | (1.69) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | .49 |
| N | 133 |

Notes: The dependent variable is turnout change from 2017 to 2021. Standard errors in parentheses. * p<.10; ** p<.05

We quantify the relationship, along with taking into account that turnout increases were larger in previously high turnout counties, in Table 4. The estimated relationship between the Republican margin in 2017 and turnout increase in 2021 indicates a ten point increase in the Republican margin was associated with almost a one point increase in turnout (.92). Comparing a strongly Democratic county (Republican margin = -50) to Republican stronghold (Republican margin +50) produces an estimated turnout increase of almost 10 percentage points (9.2). The magnitude of the estimated relationship is almost identical to the one shown in Figure 3. We speculate about the explanation for this finding below.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our hypotheses about the Republican tide in the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial election specified that it would be mediated by local factors conditional at the county level. Specifically, we

hypothesized that the tide would be stronger in counties where the effects of COVID-19 were more severe, where economic conditions were worse, and where the issue of public education was more important and salient. We found mostly null results with respect to our first two hypotheses. While we did find a relationship with respect to education, we also found that one of an even stronger magnitude was evident in the 2017 election results. Thus, we have not been able to identify systematic variation in the Republican tide that is linked to particular aspects and conditions present in the leadup to the 2021 election. Our inability to find a relationship between the Republican vote swing and either COVID-19 severity or economic performance is especially notable because of the large existing body of research on retrospective voting and electoral accountability. Instead the results imply a broader form of electoral accountability where voters responded to general political and economic conditions that affect the overall political 'mood' on the statewide or national levels, rather than responding to specific local factors.

In contrast to the changes in party shares of the vote, we did find a significant predictor for the magnitude of turnout change from 2017 to 2021. More Republican counties had larger turnout increases than more Democratic ones. Our post-hoc speculation is that Virginia's GOP may have consolidated their resources to target heavily Republican-leaning counties for voter mobilization efforts going into the November election. This attempt to 'run up the score' in Republican counties may have been a cost-effective way to help swing the outcome in their favor. Regardless of whether this interpretation is correct, the result is important as it underscores that electoral change may be brought about by changes in partisan preferences and by changes in mobilization. Most models of electoral change emphasize the former. At least in the case of Virginia in 2021, the latter appears important, too.

The most obvious limitation of our analysis is that it relies on county-level data. Though relatively large in number, they are still aggregations of individuals, and our hypotheses are based on individual-level responses. For example, economic retrospection is based on the idea that individuals whose economic outcomes have changed more for the worse than those for others will be more likely to vote for the non-incumbent party. From that, we proposed the hypothesis that counties where economic performance was worse would swing more to the Republican party than those where economic performance was better. While this sort of dual level reasoning and analysis is common, it is important to underscore that one would ideally be able to analyze turnout and voting decisions and changes in those decisions among individuals rather than at units of aggregated individuals.[24]

In light of the Virginia gubernatorial election often serving as a bellwether of the following year's congressional elections, it is worth asking why that was not the case in this electoral cycle. While a deep dive is beyond the scope of this paper, we offer some discussion of this question. We suspect that the biggest difference may have been the fact that the Virginia Republicans ran a "high-valence" candidate in 2021. In the weeks surrounding Election Day, prominent national news outlets profiled Youngkin, finding him likable and down to earth. As a post-Election Day *New York Times* analysis put it, "furious Democratic attacks that he was a Trumpian wolf in suburban-dad fleece never quite stuck because, in both biography and manner, Mr. Youngkin did not fit the former president's bullying, self-aggrandizing profile" (Gabriel 2021[25]). Youngkin as a candidate stands in contrast to many of the Republican candidates in 2022 who were often described as extremists (e.g., Kari Lake in Arizona) and/or lacking basic

[24] Another possible limitation, which is related to the above, is that some of our measures may have only indirectly, at best, tapped the concepts we intended. This may especially be the case for our education-related measures.

[25] Who Is Glenn Youngkin, and How Did He Win the Virginia Governor's Race? - The New York Times

qualifications to serve in office (e.g., Herschel Walking in Georgia). This reaffirms the importance of parties recruiting high quality candidates as an important determinant of their electoral success (Stone 2010).

Perhaps also of importance is the fact that the 2022 midterm elections were held less than five months after the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization,* which overturned the precedent regarding a woman's right to an abortion that had been set in *Roe v. Wade* (1973). CNN exit polls found that 27 percent of voters said abortion was their top issue, making it the second most salient issue of the midterms after inflation (31 percent[26]). Further, 60 percent in the survey reported feeling 'dissatisfied' or 'angry' about *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, compared to just 37 percent that reported positive feelings about the decision. We think it is plausible that the counterfactuals of holding the Virginia gubernatorial election being held after the *Dobbs* decision and holding the 2022 midterm elections without the decision having been made would have produced different results from what actually happened.

In conclusion, amidst ongoing, deep partisan polarization and 'calcification' (Sides et al 2022) within American politics and the rapidly changing economic landscape of the post pandemic United States, it may be especially valuable to analyze elections with large-magnitude electoral swings. This paper has done so for one election: Virginia's 2021 gubernatorial race. While our results are modest, we think that continuing to identify and attempt to explain substantial electoral change is a worthwhile endeavor as a possible means to provide insight into the nature of electoral accountability and the functioning of the American election system.

[26] Exit polls for Midterm Election Results 2022 | CNN Politics.